

EXHIBIT I

In the Matter Of:

UNITED STATES vs STATE OF GEORGIA

NO. 1:16-cv-03088-ELR

CASSANDRA HOLIFIELD, PH.D.

December 01, 2022



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1 A Right.

2 Q -- where your serving students.

3 So you became director of the North Metro
4 GNETS program in 2012?

5 A Uh-hum. (Affirmative.)

6 Q And I'm wondering if you recall how many
7 sites there were in the North Metro program at the
8 time you took over as director?

9 A Okay, let me count.

10 There are five in Gwinnett, one in
11 Atlanta. That's six. And six in North Fulton.
12 Twelve.

13 Q Okay. Does the North Metro GNETS program
14 has what is known as a fiscal agent?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Who is North Metro GNETS' fiscal agent?

17 A Metro RESA.

18 Q So we're on the same page, what is the
19 role of North Metro's, North Metro's fiscal agent?

20 A They oversee all of our funding that flows
21 from the State and the federal level.

22 Q And when you say they oversee the funding,
23 what does that mean?

24 A We have a CFO, chief financial officer,
25 and a budgeting and an HR Department there that we

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1 collaborate and we work with.

2 So they help me maintain all of the
3 funding and make sure that it's spent the way it's
4 supposed to be spent, in the right areas.

5 Q Okay. And so I believe you mentioned that
6 there's both state funding and federal funding?

7 A Yes.

8 Q And that's specifically for the North
9 Metro GNETS program?

10 A Yes.

11 Q That funding flows to Metro RESA?

12 A Yes.

13 Q And so Metro RESA kind of holds those
14 funds for use by the North Metro GNETS program?

15 A Yes.

16 Q What's the process by which you obtain
17 access to that, those funds, to pay staff or to buy
18 supplies, whatever it is you need? How does that
19 work?

20 A Again, we have line items. We have items
21 that are approved by the State based on those
22 guidelines. So we draw down money based on the
23 need.

24 So it's just like any other school
25 district would do. There are approved federal and

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1 state funds. So our CFO, we work together to make
2 sure that, you know, supplies, materials, computers,
3 that sort of thing, are, you know, dispensed based
4 on the needs of the program.

5 Q Do you have to submit something like a
6 purchase order?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Or some sort of actual request to Metro
9 RESA for those things?

10 A Yes.

11 Q And then Metro RESA approves it and pays
12 it out?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Do you have regular meetings with Metro
15 RESA regarding the North Metro GNETS program?

16 A Yes.

17 Q And how often are those meetings?

18 A They're anywhere between a month to two
19 months. Every other month or so.

20 Q Okay. And with whom at Metro RESA do you
21 meet?

22 A Typically with Dr. Leigh Ann Putman, my
23 RESA executive director, and Vanessa Haigler. She's
24 our CFO, and sometimes -- I'm sorry.

25 Vanessa Haigler, and sometimes with

1 you're getting that information from the student's
2 home school system?

3 A Yes.

4 MS. GARDNER: I want to ask the court
5 reporter to mark this document as Plaintiff's
6 Exhibit 631.

7 (WHEREUPON, Plaintiff's Exhibit-631 was
8 marked for identification.)

9 BY MS. GARDNER:

10 Q You've been handed what's been marked as
11 Plaintiff's Exhibit 631. This is a document on
12 Georgia Department of Education letterhead, I
13 suppose, and the title at the top is "George Network
14 for Educational and Therapeutic Support GNETS FY 22
15 Grant Application."

16 Do you recognize this document?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Is this North Metro GNETS FY 22 Grant
19 Application?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And is this a document that North Metro
22 GNETS produced to the United States in response to a
23 document subpoena?

24 A Yes.

25 Q I want to talk a little bit about the

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1 timing of this grant application.

2 First of all, who puts this grant
3 application together for North Metro?

4 A You mean that completes it? I do.

5 Q Okay, you complete the application.

6 Are you the person who actually submits
7 the application?

8 A I submit it to the portal, yes.

9 Q So you use the Georgia Department of
10 Education portal that you were talking about earlier
11 to submit this?

12 A Yes. So years ago they only had paper.
13 Now we have portal. So I just copy and paste right
14 into the portal this information.

15 Q At the top of this first page it says:
16 "This FY 22 Grant Application and required
17 attachments must be submitted by the fiscal agent
18 through the Consolidated Application no later than
19 June 30th, 2021. Budgets will be reviewed for
20 approval after all required documentation is
21 submitted through the Consolidated Application ."

22 Do you see that?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Who reviews the budgets for approval as
25 it's stated here?

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1 A So I -- my RESA director and my budget
2 person review internally through North Metro and
3 Metro RESA, and then it goes to the DOE, and Vickie
4 Cleveland and Lakesha Stevenson are the DOE GNETS
5 program manager and program specialists that review
6 and approve the document.

7 Q Okay. So just so I'm clear, Vickie
8 Cleveland is the Georgia Department of Education
9 GNETS program manager?

10 A Yes.

11 Q And Lakesha Stevenson is the GNETS program
12 specialist at the Department of Education?

13 A Yes.

14 Q So you're saying that in terms of the
15 review of budgets, once they're submitted through
16 the consolidated application, that it's Ms.
17 Cleveland and Ms. Stevenson who do that review?

18 A Yes.

19 Q So this says that this needs to be
20 submitted no later than June 30, 2021, right?

21 A Yes. But that's a typo.

22 Q Okay. What's the typo?

23 A Because the 2021 is an FY 22 grant
24 application.

25 Is that what you're asking?

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1 Beginning at the top, there's just one
2 director at North Metro, and that's you, correct?

3 A Correct.

4 Q And your position is funded by the State
5 grant?

6 A Yes.

7 Q You also have 20 classroom teachers that
8 are funded by the State grant?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Do you know where those 20 classroom
11 teachers are located?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Where are they located -- is there like a
14 particular kind of -- are all those 20 teachers at
15 centers or how does that work?

16 A They're all over. Literally, we have
17 grant funded teachers in every school building and
18 we also have LEA funded teachers in every school
19 building.

20 Q So they're mixed together?

21 A Yes.

22 Q This chart shows that at the time you
23 submitted this grant application you had four
24 psychologists?

25 A Yes.

1 Metro's compliance with the GNETS Strategic Plan?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And who establishes what that information
4 is?

5 A It's included in the rubric. So we will
6 know how to self-assess where we are with the
7 language that explains whether or not we're emerging
8 or operational in that particular area.

9 So we go through everything that we're
10 doing in our program and we utilize that rubric and
11 talk about where we are and where our needs are, and
12 then we rank order everything at the end of the
13 self-assessment and we prioritize where we need the
14 most work on.

15 We submit that to the DOE at the end of
16 each year, and they provide us feedback on where we
17 are and ask us how we're planning to move forward
18 with areas of weakness.

19 Q As part of the GNETS Strategic Plan
20 process, are there onsite visits from the Georgia
21 Department of Education in connection with that
22 assessment process?

23 A There used to be.

24 Q When was the last time that the North
25 Metro GNETS program had an onsite visit from the

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1 Georgia DOE?

2 A It was definitely prior to COVID.

3 Q Who conducted that onsite visit?

4 A Vickie Cleveland -- I'm not really sure if
5 Lakesha was on board at the time. So I know it was
6 at least Vickie Cleveland.

7 Q And what did that onsite visit entail?

8 A Basically, just our documents that are
9 listed in the rubric. They would come through --
10 they would do observations of all of our classrooms,
11 walk through to see whether our standards were on
12 the board, whether or not PBIS was being
13 implemented, and then we would sit down and we would
14 have our data notebooks to go through and they would
15 talk about each of the items that were there.

16 Now all of this is submitted
17 electronically, in that GNETS tab on the portal.

18 Q And when you say "we would sit down and we
19 would have our data notebooks to go through," who is
20 the "we"?

21 A Vickie Cleveland, the GNETS director, and
22 any of the GNETS directors' designees, leadership
23 team that she would invite to come to the meeting.

24 Q So when that, when that sort of meeting
25 happened at North Metro, were there other folks on

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1 your leadership team who would participate in
2 addition to yourself?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Who are those other people?

5 A Depending on which sites we were at,
6 sometimes it was my -- definitely my site
7 coordinator that ran the building on the day to day,
8 the behavior specialist that was on board in that
9 particular school and school district, and the
10 curriculum specialist.

11 The school psychologist or social worker
12 may come in and out of the meeting as needed, but
13 those were the -- that was the typical makeup of the
14 team.

15 Q Okay. And you noted before that as part
16 of this strategic plan and assessment process that
17 you would receive feedback from the Georgia DOE?

18 A Yes.

19 Q What kind of feedback do you -- have you
20 received?

21 A Again, they go through -- now it's
22 electronic rather than, you know, onsite. But they
23 basically go through, look at our artifact, look at
24 how we scored. They all let us know if we're
25 missing information to justify or what-have-you, to

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1 upload those documents so they could review them.

2 And the specific examples that they give
3 are listed within the rubric and the language.

4 Q And when you say the specific examples
5 that they give are listed within the rubric, the
6 specific examples of what?

7 A For example, one is behavioral and
8 therapeutic support services. So it may ask things
9 like how many FBAs and BIPs that I review program
10 wide. How many of them met operational status. How
11 many team members did I have trained in, you know,
12 therapeutic services or SEL curriculum, like WhyTry
13 or LIPT, those sorts of things.

14 So it gives you specific examples under
15 each of the standards that we can submit.

16 Q Okay. And you're submitting them to sort
17 of support a rating of either not evident, emerging,
18 or operational?

19 A Correct.

20 Q Got it.

21 If there is like a deficiency or concern
22 in an area of the strategic plan that's being
23 assessed, what happens?

24 A Typically, we just develop an action plan
25 to address the issue.

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1 Q Is that an action plan that you submit to
2 the GaDOE?

3 A Yes. It's actually listed as a part of
4 the self-assessment rubric.

5 MS. GARDNER: Let's have this document
6 marked as Plaintiff's Exhibit 642.

7 (WHEREUPON, Plaintiff's Exhibit-642 was
8 marked for identification.)

9 BY MS. GARDNER:

10 Q You've been handed what's been marked as
11 Plaintiff's Exhibit 642. This is an email from you
12 to Nakeba Rahming, Desiree Woods, Derrick Gilchrist,
13 Lisa Futch, Jackie Neal, Kathy Lewis-Hawkins, and
14 Deborah Gay, dated February 9, 2016, with the
15 subject line "RE: Draft Strategic Plan."

16 This document is Bates-stamped GA00040621.
17 Do you recognize this document?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Am I correct you write in this document:
20 "Nakeba and All - Good morning. The strategic plan
21 looks great. Below are my questions in red font"?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And your email was in response to an
24 earlier email sent by Nakeba Rahming, correct?

25 A Yes.

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1 I'm trying to see if there's any verbiage
2 that... looks like it was just a duplication.

3 Well, it does say exit criteria and
4 reintegration plan. But exit criteria got
5 eliminated.

6 Q This also has a committee that's called
7 GNETS Operation Manual?

8 A Yes.

9 Q What is GNETS Operation Manual?

10 A It was basically a guidance document that
11 came from the DOE on how to fill out some of the
12 reports, like you pulled up today, about the data
13 management tool, The State Board Rule, and like how
14 to code different things in the different meetings.

15 Q And what was the aim of this particular
16 committee working on the GNETS operation manual?

17 A It had not been updated in a really long
18 time, and if they were moving to the strategic plan,
19 just to have a guidance document to know what the
20 expectations are.

21 Q Okay. Was that document ultimately
22 updated coming out of this committee?

23 A I don't think so, no.

24 Q And why was that?

25 A I don't recall, but I think the last

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1 A It depends on whether the -- the current
2 QBE funding formula, the way that it's currently set
3 up is at a lower rate than it is for GNETS right
4 now. So it would mean reduce services rather than
5 appropriate services or more services, right now,
6 unless they really look at revising how that funding
7 formula is looked at.

8 So an even swap would not be an even swap.

9 Q So your expectation is that moving from a
10 state grant formula to a QBE formula would result in
11 GNETS programs losing money?

12 A Yeah, money -- equal services, yes.

13 And right now we need more services.

14 MS. GARDNER: I would like to have this
15 document marked as Plaintiff's Exhibit 659.

16 (WHEREUPON, Plaintiff's Exhibit-659 was
17 marked for identification.)

18 BY MS. GARDNER:

19 Q You've been handed what's been marked as
20 Plaintiff's Exhibit 659. This is an email thread
21 between you and Vickie Cleveland and Lakesha
22 Stevenson, from June 2019, regarding GNETS Continuum
23 of Services, Student Level Record & Funding.

24 A Uh-hum. (Affirmative.)

25 Q This document is Bates-stamped GA00347596.

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1 Do you recognize this?

2 A Yes.

3 Q I want to start at the bottom of this
4 email thread, which is the first in time email. So
5 direct your attention to the second-to-last page.

6 This is your email to Vickie and Lakesha
7 on June 6, 2019?

8 A Uh-hum. (Affirmative.)

9 Q In that email, Ms. -- the third sentence
10 in, you say: "As you know, it's the end of the year
11 and I'm in the process of making sure that all of my
12 NM GNETS students appear on each of my respective
13 district's student level record reports prior to our
14 superintendent signing off so we will receive the
15 correct amount of funding. I'm emailing you now
16 because I inquired about one of my missing students
17 on one of my district's student level record
18 reports. We've been providing consultative services
19 for this student and I was told since we only
20 provide 2 hours of consultative services to the
21 student a month, he will not be coded 4 and we will
22 not receive funding for him. Will you please let me
23 know how many hours a month of GNETS consultative
24 supports earn funding?"

25 A Uh-hum. (Affirmative.)

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1 Q Is this another example of the funding
2 concern that we discussed earlier with GNETS sort of
3 difficulty with providing services in general
4 education environments because of the lack of
5 receiving funding for that?

6 A Yes.

7 Q Moving down, you say, and this is the
8 sentence that begins with "However."

9 You say: "As we continue to provide more
10 intensive therapeutic support services, we have more
11 students returning to their LRE which is amazing and
12 is what we want to do. However, our enrollment
13 drops and the most significantly mentally ill and
14 behaviorally challenged students remain, while our
15 budgets continue to shrink as we help students
16 transition to their new LRE."

17 A Uh-hum. (Affirmative.)

18 Q This was an effect that you had been
19 seeing at the North Metro GNETS program?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And that's about your funding is tied to
22 enrollment?

23 A It's tied to enrollment, but the students,
24 as we do a better job providing therapeutic
25 supports, our numbers shrink, but the mental health

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1 issues of the students that remain are greater. So
2 numbers don't equate to the individual needs that
3 the students have. And that's currently the way I
4 perceive that the budget is set up.

5 Q Ms. Cleveland responded to your email on
6 June 7, 2019, right?

7 A Yes.

8 Q And looking towards the bottom of her
9 response, where she says, "The GNETS continuation of
10 services flow chart."

11 A Yes.

12 Q She says: "The GNETS continuation of
13 services flow chart provides guidance on consult
14 services. There is a request for consultation form
15 in the packet. NM should follow this protocol.
16 Several our sites have their current staff provide
17 support for students that are reintegrating or they
18 provide observations that are needed.

19 "NM has several support staff and the team
20 may need to take a look at how these staff might
21 better provide consult services. We do have
22 programs that are providing these service with less
23 staff. Consult services are mostly support for
24 teachers, not direct supports to students from my
25 observations."

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1 What did you understand Ms. Cleveland to
2 be saying to you?

3 A To figure it out. I mean basically. I
4 just felt like, you know, she was just saying I
5 needed to look to see how I could use the new GNETS
6 funding State Board Rule to provide those services
7 with the current staff that I have, which is pulling
8 from the staff that I have with the most mental
9 health needs.

10 So, again, from my perspective, you're
11 robbing Peter to pay Paul. If you have the most
12 significant kids in the program because of their
13 mental health and behavioral challenges, but then
14 we're also wanting to provide those services to the
15 kids in the LRE so we won't have recidivism, them
16 coming back and getting those teachers trained, you
17 can't to both with the same person effectively.

18 Q And to be clear, here you were talking
19 about providing direct services to students in the
20 LRE?

21 A Yes. So it was a combination of providing
22 direct services to the students and also the staff
23 because we're not going to be there, we being GNETS,
24 can't be in more than one place. But if the child
25 is going to be successful in the LRE, we need to

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1 equip the teachers with the skill set that we have
2 where the child was successful.

3 So it's kind of a balance in training the
4 student but also training the teachers as well to
5 support them.

6 Q And you said the concerns that you raised
7 in prior emails and in this one have not been
8 addressed to your satisfaction?

9 A No.

10 MS. GARDNER: I'm going to ask that this
11 document be marked as Plaintiff's Exhibit 660.

12 (WHEREUPON, Plaintiff's Exhibit-660 was
13 marked for identification.)

14 BY MS. GARDNER:

15 Q You have been handed what's been marked as
16 Plaintiff's Exhibit 660. This is an email from you
17 to Nakeba Rahming and Vickie Cleveland, dated
18 February 14, 2018, with the subject: "FW:
19 Independence High School Location."

20 This is Bates-stamped GA00201024.

21 Do you recognize this?

22 A Yes.

23 Q In this email you say to Ms. Cleveland and
24 Ms. Rahming: "I want to keep in the loop regarding
25 the facilities complaints I've been receiving our

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1 they put the programs that were in the old building
2 that they were tearing down and rebuilding, they put
3 us in a renovated building that was connected to an
4 historic museum in Fulton County. So we were on the
5 backside of the museum.

6 Q So I take it from your email that GNETS
7 had asked to use space in the museum because the
8 GNETS program didn't have adequate space in their
9 part of the Independence High School location to
10 provide therapeutic services?

11 A Correct.

12 Q And Independence High School told GNETS
13 they could not use the museum space?

14 A Yes.

15 Q Do general education facilities where
16 North Metro GNETS houses classrooms have the final
17 say in what parts of the building North Metro GNETS
18 can use?

19 A Well, the buildings are owned by the LEAs,
20 not by GNETS. And so whenever we have a facilities
21 issue, I have to bring it up to the district
22 themselves. So we don't own any of the buildings.
23 So I have to collaborate with them to get it
24 resolved.

25 Q And so you said that there is no longer a